

Notes on Raymond Williams (1977). Ch.9 "Structures of feeling," in *Marxism and Literature*

To do with things we think of as currently 'present' in our lives and as exerting an influence on them, i.e., 'facts' of the moment: (1950's-70's - the nuclear threat; 1990's - a clear sense that 'swing is back'; that a new 'style - hip/hop' is emerging; that the campus is not a safe place at night for women; that Washington is 'peculiar' and not 'parallel' to what goes on the rest of the country) □

1) Talk of "Culture" and "Society:"

- -Tendency to take what we do as conscious, thinking, deliberately acting individuals as a model for how we conduct ourselves in our everyday practices
 - -Retrospective talk of finished, complete, systems
 - -Of formed wholes rather than of forming
 - -Separation: THEN... the social is always past, fixed, explicit, objective... determining
 - -HERE, NOW, ALIVE... subjective, individual interpretation
- "In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes" (p.128).
- "If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find new terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of the present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products" (p.128).

"And then if the social is the fixed and explicit - the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions - all that is present and moving, all that escapes from the fixed and explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective'" (p.128).

2) Talk of "thought:"

- -Thought in terms of explicit, logical, complete, closed systems
 - -So different from THINKING that we talk of thinking in terms of... consciousness, experience, feeling
- "There is another related distinction. As thought is described, in the same habitual past tense, it is indeed so different, in its explicit and finished forms, from much or even anything that we can presently recognize as thinking, that we set against it more active, more flexible, less singular terms - consciousness, experience, feeling - and then watch even these drawn towards fixed, finite, receding forms" (pp.128-

9).

3) Works of art

- -They are, in one sense, explicit and finished
- -But, we make them 'present' in our lives in specifically 'active' readings
- -Examples????
- -They come to play a part in our lives because "they are all the time lived" (p.129).

"... we have to make them present, in specifically active 'readings'. It is also that the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present. At different moments in history, and in significantly different ways, the reality and even the primacy of such presences and such processes, such diverse and yet specific actualities, have been powerfully asserted and reclaimed, as in practice of course they are all the time lived" (p.129).

- -But there is still the tendency to reduce the practical sense we make of them to categories, to terms within a system of codes and decodings, etc...

"But they are often asserted as forms themselves, in contention with other known forms: the subjective as distinct from the objective; experience from belief; feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social. The undeniable power of two great modern ideological systems - the 'aesthetic' and the 'psychological' - is, ironically, systematically derived from these senses of instance and process, where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled" (p.129).

THE REDUCTION OF THE SOCIAL TO FIXED FORMS: OF 'TERMS OF ANALYSIS' TO 'TERMS OF SUBSTANCE'

"Yet it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error. Marx often said this, and some Marxists quote him, in fixed ways (!!!), before returning to fixed forms" (p.129).

- -We often talk of 'social classes', of 'world-views', or 'ideologies'... even with adequate evidence... as if such 'things' exist.

"The mistake, as so often, is in taking terms of analysis as terms of substance. Thus we speak of a world-view or of a prevailing ideology or of a class-outlook, often with adequate evidence, but in this regular slide towards a past tense and fixed form suppose, or even do not know that we have to suppose, that these exist and are lived specifically and definitively in singular and developing forms" (p.129).

- -And, as if people do their living in terms of such 'entities'

"Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their surviving records are against it. But the living will not be reduced, at least in the first person; living third persons may be different. All the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself" (pp.129-130).

- -Such 'social forms' are then admitted in arguments for GENERALITIES, but debarred, contemptuously, from vivid experience

- -There is a turn of others abstractions: the 'human imagination', the 'human psyche', the 'unconscious'... with all their 'functions'
- SOCIAL FORMS (as analytic abstractions)
- -They do exist
- -They become more recognizable when articulate and explicit
- -Dominant systems of belief, of education, etc., do influence systems of explanation and argument
- -But: i) not the whole inventory of social consciousness; ii) 'social forms' only a part of social consciousness when 'lived', 'actively', in 'real relationships'.
- -But: practical consciousness is more than the handling of fixed forms and units: i) tension between received opinions and actual practical experience; ii) but often the tension is a felt unease, a sense of something 'yet-to-come'.
- -Experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all.
- -Mixed experiences

"[Social forms] become social consciousness only when they are lived, actively, in real relationships and moreover in relationships which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units. Indeed just because all consciousness is social, its processes occur not only between but within the relationship and the related" (p.130).

"And this practical consciousness is always more than a handling of fixed forms and units. There is frequent tension between the received interpretation and practical experience... the tension is often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming" (p.130).

- -THE ACTUAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE RECEIVED AND PRODUCED FIXED FORMS IS NOT SILENCE: NOT THE ABSENCE, THE UNCONSCIOUS, WHICH BOURGEOIS CULTURE HAS MYTHICIZED. IT IS A KIND OF FEELING!!!

"Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness... For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange" (p.131).

CHANGES OF 'STYLE' IN LANGUAGE

"... no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors. The difference can be defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications, but these do not exhaust it. What really changes is something quite general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change best is the literary term 'style'. It is a general change, rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects" (p.131).

- -Changes are not assumed to be 'epiphenomenal' changes in institutions, formations, or beliefs, but 'new beginnings'

□ -Also, from the beginning, taken as 'social' rather than merely 'personal' experiences.

□ -They are changes in PRESENCE

□ -Also, they do not have to await DEFINITION, CLASSIFICATION, or RATIONALIZATION, before being lived

QUALITATIVE CHANGES: "They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced sense of the social as institutional and the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence* (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived it is still their substantial characteristic); second, in that they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (pp.131-132).

"STRUCTURES OF FEELING"

□ -Meanings and values as actively lived and felt

□ -Matters of impulse, restraint, and tone

Structures of feeling: "It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations.. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity" (p.132).

"We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (p.132).

"We are also defining a social experience still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies" (p.132).

"For structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available" (pp.133-134).

□ -We need a way of acknowledging and welcoming the specificity of these elements - "specific feelings, specific rhythms - and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root) historically reduced" (p.133).

□ -It is not mere flux, but leads to new 'starting-points' and new 'conclusions'

"It is a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations - new semantic figures - are discovered in material practice: often, as it happens, in relatively isolated ways, which are only later seen to compose a significant (often in fact minority) generation: this often, in turn, the generation that substantially connects to its successor" (p.134).

William's analysis of the changed (hidden) meaning of four key terms in the 1984-85 miner's strike - management, economic, community, and law-and-order:

1) Management: A confusion of the term 'management' with the older term of 'master' and 'employer'... to subordinate a whole class of men and women to the will of others... the interests of a technical elite responsive only to the state (board of trustees) 2) Economic: The nomadic character of multinational capitalism is reflected in the reduction of the term 'economic' to the isolated (decontextualized) 'accounting of short-term costs'. 3) Community: 'Community' becomes a victim of the 'economic' under such circumstances... 4) Law-and-Order: The appeal to 'an order'... the technical elite is responsive only to a short-term costs.

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